

Richard Marcinko (b. 1940)

by **Delson Ong**



"Change hurts. It makes people insecure, confused, and angry. People want things to be the same as they have always been, because that makes life easier. But, if you are a leader, you cannot let your people hang on to the past."

- Retired US Navy SEAL
Commander Richard Marcinko¹

INTRODUCTION

In the eyes of the public, the United States (US) Navy's Sea, Air and Land Teams, commonly known as the Navy SEALs, are a group of elite individuals that have accomplished incredible feats. Of the many Special Forces teams, one of them is responsible for the death of the founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden—SEAL Team Six. Many people would give the credit to SEAL Team Six, but let us not forget the man behind the scenes, the brilliant individual who singlehandedly put together this special team. This person is none other than retired US Navy SEAL commander, Richard Marcinko.

EARLY LIFE

Richard Marcinko was born on 21st November, 1940, in a coal-mining town in Carbon County, Pennsylvania. His parents were immigrants from the Czech Republic, and when he was young, they would mine coal in humid dark tunnels. 'Life was simple, and

life was hard,' was how Marcinko described his childhood.² Shortly before attending high school, the family moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey, where he attended Admiral Farragut Academy.³ His parents, however, split up during his high school years, and Marcinko dropped out of high school later that year in 1958.

Feeling that his life could potentially spiral down to meaninglessness, young Marcinko decided to take matters into his own hands. A coincidental encounter with US Marines inspired Marcinko to enlist. His first attempt at enlisting was unsuccessful, as the Marine Recruiter told him to finish high school first before he could apply. But Marcinko did not like that at all. Going back to school was not an option at that point in time. So, a few months later in September, Richard Marcinko tried enlisting with the US Navy. This time round, he was successful.⁴

MILITARY CAREER

After enlistment, Marcinko underwent basic training at the US Navy's Great Lakes facility, before becoming a radioman at a naval base at Quonset Point, Rhode Island, where he worked as a teletype operator as part of a temporary assignment.⁵ It was there that he watched a movie—The Frogmen—that determined his career path in the US Navy. He had set his sights on becoming a member of the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs); he wanted to be a 'destroyer'.⁶

Underwater Demolition Team

After completing radio school in Norfolk, Virginia, Marcinko applied to join the UDTs, and he arrived at the UDT base at Little Creek, Virginia, on 21st June, 1961. The trainees were told on their first day that should they fail the course, they would have to go back to where they came from. To Marcinko, being sent back to the regular Navy was a pushing alternative, in his estimation.⁷ But his chances of graduation from the course were not great, to say the least. Only one out of every five students would make it to graduation day, and Marcinko was determined to make it through. All around him, he watched as hard, experienced men either failed or quit. Knowing that there would not be a second

chance, Marcinko worked through fear, physical injuries, harsh verbal abuse, deep ice-cold waters and the ever-present nagging gnaw of fatigue.⁸ After months of grueling training, he finally graduated from the course and joined the US Navy's elite UDTs.

Becoming an Officer

Marcinko's outstanding perseverance throughout the course earned him the moniker 'Demolition Dick, Shark Man of the Navy'.⁹ Not long after graduation, he was approached by several officers and seniors, who suggested that Marcinko apply for Officer Candidate School. Initially, Marcinko resented the idea, basing it on the fact that it was unlikely for a high school dropout to become an officer; the goal seemed too improbable.¹⁰ However, Marcinko eventually applied and in December 1965, he graduated from Officer Candidate School.

Navy SEALs

Back then, the forerunners of the Navy SEALs were merged in this elite unit, the UDTs. It was only in 1962, when former US President John F. Kennedy realised the need for unconventional warfare, that the SEALs were established. Building on the UDT's elite qualities and water-borne expertise, the SEALs

would add land combat skills into their repertoire.¹¹ Before Marcinko entered UDT, the Navy SEALs were still a part of the elite team (which explained why Marcinko wanted to join the UDT so badly). But the Navy SEALs were separated from the UDT when he graduated from Officer Candidate School, so Marcinko, knowing full well that he wanted to become a SEAL, pulled every string he could to get himself assigned to SEAL Team Two, which he did. After seven years, Marcinko was finally a part of the Navy SEALs.

VIETNAM WAR

Marcinko served two tours in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968, the first of which was located thirteen kilometres west of Tra Noc, South Vietnam. There, Marcinko led his men on a mission to ambush the Vietcong. Despite successfully surprising the enemy, the SEALs faced a well-organised opposition.¹² An intense two hour firefight later, with both sides still locked in battle, Marcinko decided to radio for an air strike—a decision that would secure the victory for Marcinko and his men. But, that decision was not met with praises, as he was criticised by his officers for violating protocol. Going into combat without clearance and calling in

an air strike were prerogatives of much more senior officers, not Marcinko himself.¹³

Victory on the battlefield mattered more than anything else to Marcinko, but that was not the case for his commanding officers back at camp. To him, he cared about combat and they cared about careers. To them, Marcinko had threatened the entire chain of command.¹⁴ His insubordination would ultimately lead to the US Navy calling it the ‘most successful SEAL operation in the Mekong Delta,’ and it was the start of a pattern that would, in time to come, distinguish him from the rest.¹⁵

First Bronze Star

Marcinko’s second Vietnam tour saw him being involved in the Tet Offensive, one of the largest military campaigns of the Vietnam War.¹⁶ Initially tasked with assisting the US Army Special Forces in the urban street fight, Marcinko and his men soon found themselves on another mission—they were tasked to rescue American nurses and schoolteachers who were trapped in hospitals and churches located throughout the city of Châu Đốc, which acted as temporary safe houses until the cavalry arrived. Moving through the once picturesque village, Marcinko led his men from the front,

braving machine gun fire and mortar attacks while navigating through the apocalyptic ruin. In the end, he was able to locate the survivors and lead them to safety. Marcinko’s bravery under fire during the operation earned him his first Bronze Star.

Post-Vietnam War

After two tours in Vietnam, and a two-year state-side staff assignment, Marcinko was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and assigned the Naval Attaché to Cambodia in 1973, where he led covert operations, amongst many other taskings. Marcinko’s ascent up the career ladder meant that he was slowly drifting away from combat. But as luck would have it, he was given a front row seat in the largest foreign policy calamity of the 1970s—the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979.¹⁷

OPERATION EAGLE CLAW

Operation Eagle Claw was an operation ordered by the US President at that time, Jimmy Carter, to attempt to end the Iranian hostage crisis in Iran’s capital city of Tehran. Some fifty-two American diplomats and US Marines were taken hostage on 4th November, 1979 by an armed mob that had surged into the US embassy compound in Tehran.¹⁹

At that time, Marcinko was one of two Navy representatives for a Joint Chiefs of Staff task force known as the Terrorist Attack Team, and he was in charge of briefing the Chief of Naval operations on intelligence and terrorism.²⁰ The fact that the hostages, who were diplomats, were tortured indicated that the Iranian government would not settle for a treaty fine print, which prompted Marcinko to participate in the planning of a secret mission (codenamed Operation Eagle Claw) to rescue the hostages. But, despite thorough planning for five months, the mission failed before it even started.

Fortunately, the hostages were freed after 444 days of captivity, ending the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Although the rescue mission was a failure in many ways, it did succeed in one aspect: the failure of Operation Eagle Claw led to the creation of SEAL Team Six.

SEAL TEAM SIX

In the wake of Operation Eagle Claw, founder of SEAL Team Six, Marcinko, was tasked with the design and development of a full-time dedicated counter terrorist team. At that time, the

Navy had only two SEAL teams, and Marcinko deliberately named the new unit SEAL Team Six, in an effort to trick others into thinking that the US had three other SEAL teams that they were unaware of.²¹ Under Marcinko, the culture in SEAL Team Six was unlike any other special forces or anti-terrorist team. His men were allowed to grow long hair and wear earrings in order to blend in and maintain covert identities. In addition, every man in Team Six was required to be able to perform every task, no matter how big or small it was. What eventually came out of this unlikely setting set by Marcinko was a unique and hardened group of war fighters who looked like surfers and bikers.²²

THE BIN LADEN RAID

One of the biggest achievements in SEAL and possibly American history to date would be the execution of Osama bin Laden. Being handpicked to deal with America's number one enemy at the time is a testament to the effective combat capability of the Navy SEALs. However, publicly announcing the heroic deeds of SEAL Team Six was not the best thing after all. The glorification of their victory made them targets as well, and the SEALs knew it. Indeed, a few months later, a SEAL Team Six helicopter was gunned down

by a rocket-propelled grenade in Afghanistan. Although it is impossible to say with certainty that naming the executioners led to their deaths, the casual use of the SEAL Teams led to the tragedy, and it only goes to show that the dangers of being a part of this special force are very real.

DECORATED WAR VETERAN

By the end of his military career, Marcinko was a highly decorated war veteran. He was awarded with over a dozen medals. He was awarded four Bronze Stars for his actions during the Vietnam War, and was also a recipient of the Legion of Merit, as well as the Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Silver Star, amongst many others.²³

After retiring from military service, Marcinko authored several books, both fiction and non-fiction. To date, his best book is still his autobiography 'Rogue Warrior'. He continues to serve the community even after his retirement, appearing on talk shows, and will always remain an iconic figure in Navy SEAL history. 🌐

ENDNOTES

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23. *Richard Marcinko*, (Wikipedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Marcinko.